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The Use of an Object

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Abstract

I reflect on the act of responding and its relation to the nature of encounter, the premise that underpins the interdisciplinary project that resulted in the publication of the book, *Clinical Encounters in Sexuality: Psychoanalytic Practice and Queer Theory* (2017a), edited by Eve Watson and myself. I consider, more specifically, the potential use of the book as an object within the context of psychoanalytic discussions around object usage.

Biographical note

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What does it mean to respond? To respond is to act, to react, but it is something different, something more. To respond is to react plus something else. What that something else might be and how it might relate to the nature of encounter forms the basis of this piece. I have been invited to contribute a response as part of a series of written responses to *Clinical Encounters in Sexuality: Psychoanalytic Practice and Queer Theory* (2017a), a book I edited with Eve Watson. The central structuring devices underpinning the book are threefold: encounter, reaction, response. This triangular dialectic does not work along linear or developmental lines. Rather it is a frame that facilitates the reader having an experience. What they do with that experience is specific to each individual reader and so cannot be pre-

determined or controlled. Every encounter with a book produces an experience that is unique to each reader.

What distinguishes *Clinical Encounters in Sexuality* in this regard is the attention paid to the particularity of the experience, so that experience itself becomes an object to be wondered about. It is central to the book and to the work we do as psychoanalytic clinicians. Indeed, all acts of reacting and responding take an object. They are, by their very nature, reactions or responses *to* something. The preposition *to* gestures towards a relation, a link. Even when the intention is to sunder the link, or attack it, a link nevertheless persists for the moment during which the object is encountered. And so, there is, by extension, a temporal element to reacting and responding. How I react or respond to something in this moment will differ from how I react or respond to it at another moment. Context is key. Context in this case being both the psychical and environmental factors that make reacting and responding possible in the first place.

Readers familiar with the work of Donald Winnicott (1969) will recognise that the title of this piece alludes to his writing on “The use of an object and relating through identifications”. He makes a distinction between “object-relating” and “object-usage” (p. 117). The difference for the object is that in the former the object is subjectively perceived while in the latter it is objectively perceived (p. 121). Object-relating involves a relationship with the object that is based on “a bundle of projections” (p. 118). The object is therefore a narcissistic extension of the subject, to the extent that the object is not seen for itself but only as it exists as a reflective surface for the subject’s projections. The subject is encountering, in this instance, themselves rather than another, though they remain unaware of this. Object-usage involves a relation to the object “as a thing in itself” (p. 118), outside the subject’s “omnipotent control” (p. 120). It demands an “acceptance” on the part of the subject that the object has an “independent existence” and has “been there all the time” (p. 119).

It is necessary to develop, Winnicott tells readers, “a capacity” to use an object (pp. 116). This capacity must not be assumed in the adult. The transformation from object-relating to object-usage turns on the subject’s psychical destruction of the object (p. 121), the survival of the actual object in a non-retaliatory way (p. 122), at which point the subject recognises the object as part of a shared external reality (p. 126). In this, there develops an appreciation for “object-constancy” (p. 126). Winnicott’s (1953) description of the

transitional object in “Transitional objects and transitional phenomena” operates in the “intermediate” (p. 2) space between object-relating and object-usage. It is neither an “internal” nor an “external” object, though it contains elements of both (p. 13), while being distinctive in its difference (p. 19). It helps to mediate the process of accepting “difference and similarity” (p. 8), “me” and “not-me” (p. 2).

Winnicott (1953; 1969) is referring in the above writings to the psychical use of an object; to what happens to an external object in the subject’s internal world. An object might be used in a concrete way, incorporated to the point that it looks as if it has been taken in, but it soon becomes apparent that it might have been ingested but not absorbed, so that it is reproduced at a later date in an unmetabolised way. This can happen particularly in situations where intellectualisation and rationalisation serve to strip the encounter of its rawness, with the result that any reaction is dulled and a response becomes impossible. What presents in place of a response is an amalgam of part-objects, stray words and phrases passing as “facts” or “informed opinion”, coupled with societal and cultural assumptions and stuck together with unprocessed reactions, displaced from a whole variety of prior experiences. This mess is then packaged up in folds of intellectualisation and rationalisation, before being refashioned as reasonably-presented arguments and self-evident proclamations, yet the mess remains.

This happens a lot with sexuality. It is one of the reasons I approached Eve Watson in 2008 to ask her if she would be interested in collaborating with me on an interdisciplinary research project on psychoanalysis and sexuality. I had noticed that psychoanalytic clinicians, who displayed a real curiosity and impressive thoughtfulness about the minutiae of psychic life, tended to speak in reified terms when it came to sexuality. This was not true of everyone but it was a noticeable occurrence. I was interested to see how we might explore and challenge this phenomenon of reification as it related to sexuality. When I use the word “reification”, I am referring to a situation in which thoughts about sexuality are present but there is no evidence of thinking (Bion, 1962a). In place of thinking are words that have been picked up from books and articles, clinicians who have taught the practitioner during their clinical training, training analysts and supervisors, other individuals in the practitioner’s life, and the social and cultural milieu generally. These words are products of concretisation: ideas that have been identified with but which remain beta-elements (Bion, 1962b, pp. 13-14) or thoughts in search of a thinker (Lopez-Corvo, 2006), to use Wilfred Bion’s terminology.

The words that deliver these unintegrated fragments may present as intellectually-meaningful discourse but they are psychically-meaningless to the subject who utters them.

They are, in other words, reactions rather than responses. I began this piece by stating that “To respond is to react plus something else”. I encounter an object, I enter into an experience, I have a reaction as a consequence of that experience, at which point I might act, I might react. Or I might wait. This is not a choice that I can consciously make. It is a capacity that is or is not present. This is what I have referred to elsewhere as “waiting in time” (Giffney, 2016, p. 155), what Bion (1962a) names the no-breast or no-thing (pp. 111-112), what Melanie Klein calls the bad breast (Klein, 1952, p. 63). It is this space that provokes frustration, which Bion (1962a) explains can be evaded and evacuated into the object via a process of projective identification or modified and transformed into a thought. This is no simple task. Time must be “endured” (Baraitser, 2017). This is part of the work of alpha-function, the thinking mechanism described by Bion (1962b, pp. 15-16), that facilitates the process of thinking thoughts through. This is also, I would argue, what constitutes the demarcation between a reaction and a response. A response requires considerable work on the part of the psyche. It is not simply a *fait accompli* if a capacity for alpha-function exists in the subject’s mind.

When we enter the consulting room to meet a patient, we endeavour to open ourselves up for an encounter with the other. This is easy to say but, as anyone who works clinically is aware, it is very difficult to do. It is incredibly difficult to remain open to the other and the other’s experience. This experience of difference has profound and far-reaching effects for all of us as individuals and as a group of psychoanalytic clinicians. The turbulence engendered in us as a result of sitting with the uncertainty of encountering a different subjectivity leads us to seek certainty in other aspects of our experience. We can get stuck on certain ideas, so that particular things become concrete and definite. We are the ones who know. For some of us it might be sexuality, or it might be something else. We are not immune to the seductions of certainty and the charms of omnipotence. Sexuality can become a convenient depository for some of these concretised, unmetabolised and unthinkable thoughts, because it is such an intimate and difficult aspect of experience for most, if not all, of us. Sexuality can function as a “toilet-breast”, Donald Meltzer’s (1974) term for the use of an object as “a receptacle in order to unburden oneself” (p. 140), a container for persecutory projections, too much for the subject’s mind to bear (Meltzer, 1967, p. 20).

Clinical Encounters in Sexuality has been designed to engage with this aspect of experience. Its aim, for me, is not to teach or admonish, to manipulate or to coax. Rather, it invites the reader into an array of potential experiences from cover to cover, including the cover. It is up to the reader whether to engage, and how much. As I set forth in my Introduction to the volume: “The book is above all an opportunity for readers to engage in an experience with their own views on sexuality and how they might be bringing pre-determined beliefs into the consulting room unbeknownst to themselves, if they work in clinical practice” (Giffney, 2017b, p. 38). That is, for me, the book’s primary intervention, though not its only intervention. Readers will make use of the book in a multitude of ways, and indeed have done so already (Baraitser, Roseneil, Lance, Cavanagh, Richards, Voela and Nigianni, Anderson, Watson, this issue; Giffney and Watson, 2017b; British Psychoanalytic Council, 2017; Giffney and Watson, 2018; Anderson and Stacey, 2018; Giffney, Watson and Lance, 2018). I see the strands of the book as akin to Donald Winnicott’s squiggles (Dethiville, 2019): they are offers to play *with* and, in doing so, to risk learning something about oneself. While readers will learn something about psychoanalysis and queer theory and sexuality among other matters from *Clinical Encounters in Sexuality*, I hope they will risk learning something about themselves. And in doing that, they might offer a response.

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